



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Growth and the good life

Over the last couple of weeks I've heard from a growing chorus of people — and some of you aren't going to like this — that Sisters is "losing its small-town appeal." A number of folk across the spectrum — old-timers, young'uns, and a number of in-betweeners — have shared with me a list of irritants to support their opinion.

So, in the interest of genuine diversity, I decided to air some of those thoughts because they might be instructive, or illuminating, or at least worthy of space that they probably won't get anywhere else. Here's a small sampling of unsolicited opinions:

"Too many tourists. They are everywhere. Like fire ants."

"It's the traffic. And the vibe has changed. Sisters has lost something."

"We are moving. We've had enough."

"Nobody even talks about the crime."

And finally, this one, which sounds almost like poetry: "It's becoming tacky. A tacky, tangerine and bling tourist town with bums."

There is always a counter-narrative to unabashed boosterism, and no one can deny the superb — and

occasionally breathtaking — job that the Chamber of Commerce and others have done to promote the very many positives of life in Sisters Country. We can, and should, be grateful they have done so, because small towns must, for their survival, seek some economic niche to sustain any kind of growth, particularly when that town has no other industry to support its population.

But this small sampling — cut and pasted from a broad canvas — highlights a theme that is probably worth paying attention to (*see related story, page 1*).

It's worthy because, as the once-remote corners of the West continue to "settle up" and little towns like Sisters are forced to embrace the sometimes-painful machinations of evolution into something else, these issues aren't going to suddenly vanish.

It's probable that the issues that come with growth — coupled with disastrous policy in places like California that has created waves of political and economic refugees — and the subsequent boom in populations, traffic, crime, homelessness, reckless disregard for individual and property rights (to say nothing of just good manners) will only become more intractable and divisive over time.

That's the story of the West, post Frederick Jackson Turner, and I haven't even touched on the most explosive Western topic: water.

California, naturally, is a cautionary tale. The utter unwillingness of successive California governments to meaningfully address Wallace Stegner's conclusions about life west of the 100th Meridian — rain does not follow the plow — have come to haunt the Golden State in countless ways.

That haunting includes

the startling vision of a central valley — breadbasket of the world — that has dropped an estimated 28 feet due to relentless pumping from aquifers that can't recharge. In California, and all over the western United States, which is mostly desert, there are more draws on scant water resources than ever, creating an endless loop of diminishing returns for basic sustainability.

And meanwhile, more and more people populate eco-systems that cannot support them without enormous ecological destruction, and cost-prohibitive feats of engineering.

More and more people require more and more food, which requires more and more water, which between the Wasatch and the Sierra-Cascades is a hard thing to come by in the finest years.

Even Salem, over the on the wet side, is suffering from what Victor Davis Hanson calls the "fragility of complex systems," creating the odd spectacle of 41 different Oregon water systems vulnerable to toxic algae blooms, and warnings for vulnerable segments of the population not to drink the water.

And what a fine thing it must be to have National Guard troops handing out water at distribution points — a thing Central California has been doing for years.

There is an alternative vision to how to properly "settle up" a country, though no one paid much attention to it in the early days. That's mostly because we live under notions of a "growth economy," which is predicated on the notion that a rising tide raises all boats. What frequently gets left out of that equation is that an ebbing tide lowers all of those same boats, and when the land and waters that sustain

us are taxed beyond their carrying capacity in good times, bad times can get very bad indeed.

Alan Thein Durning, writing in a brilliant essay called "The Conundrum of Consumption," reminded us that "If the life-supporting ecosystems of the planet are to survive for future generations, the consumer society will have to dramatically curtail its use of resources."

That includes fresh water, and although almost no one with a functioning mind and honest appreciation for the beast of our consumer culture would argue that he is, in the long-term, wrong about his conclusions, our sincerest efforts are falling far short of the mark because we have a hard time seeing resources as finite — particularly when they brush up against a now-inveterate entitlement

mindset.

What does all of that mean for Sisters?

There are good people in Sisters' government who are asking that question and trying to formulate a vision for the future. I urge you to become a part of that process. Do it now, so that you might have a say in deciding how much is too much, and before it gets so big and so loud that no one can hear you above the traffic and the sirens.

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